

Columbia River NPDES Permits Questions and Answers

1. Q: What's covered under these NPDES permits? Is spill from dams covered?

A: The permits cover oil and grease discharges from dam operations and added heat from cooling water discharges. The permits do not cover river temperatures behind reservoirs, since previous court cases have ruled that NPDES permits for dams cover pollutants that have been added. Spill from dams is not covered in these permits, since spill is related to increasing fish passage, not to pollutant discharges from the dams covered under the NPDES program.

2. Q: How are NPDES permits going to help threatened and endangered salmon?

A: The upcoming permits are expected to track and minimize oil and grease discharges, restrict PCB discharges, and collect more temperature data. These things will help reduce the amount of pollutants that salmon are exposed to from dams. Preliminary studies indicate that heat discharges from dams covered under NPDES permits have little to no impact on temperatures in the Columbia and Snake Rivers, because there are much higher flows in the Columbia and Snake Rivers and from water used for hydroelectric generation and spill. However, temperature data from dam discharges are limited, so the permit will require extensive temperature monitoring that will help the EPA's understanding of the dams' impacts on temperatures to inform the next permits.

3. Q: How are the permits including information from other processes in the Columbia River, such as the Environmental Impact Statement, Total Maximum Daily Load, and Biological Evaluation?

A: The EPA is working closely with federal, state, and tribal partners to use the best available information to develop robust permit conditions for the dams. This work includes considering any information from other processes in the Columbia River that could affect or inform the NPDES permits.

4. Q: How is the EPA communicating with federal, state and tribal partners?

A: EPA is working closely with stakeholders, including having tours of the federal dams, phone calls, emails, and in-person meetings. Topics include clarifications on dam operations, questions on permit implementation, and updates on permit development.